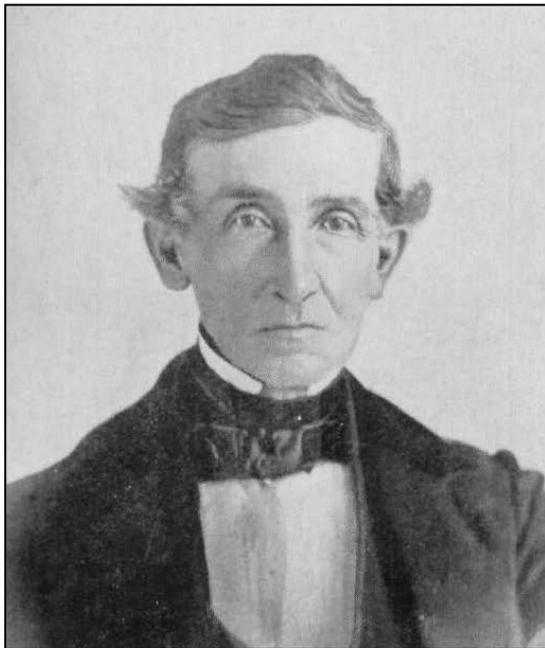


Pieces of Iowa's Past, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides weekly during the Legislative Session, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All italicized text/block quotes in this document are taken directly from historical publications with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

Background

Major William Williams of Fort Dodge, having been authorized by Governor



Major William Williams

James W. Grimes, responded to the invasion by a group of hostile Sioux at Spirit Lake in 1857. There were three volunteer companies sent to combat or capture the Sioux, rescue the living, and bury the dead, but by the time they reached the area there were no Sioux found.

There were about 100 volunteers in the Spirit Lake Relief Expedition. This is the story of their return to Fort Dodge in the early spring of 1857. The hardships they faced because of an early spring blizzard are documented in many historical publications.

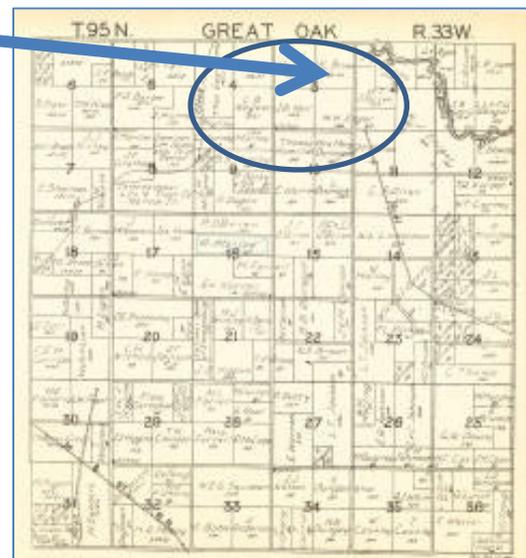
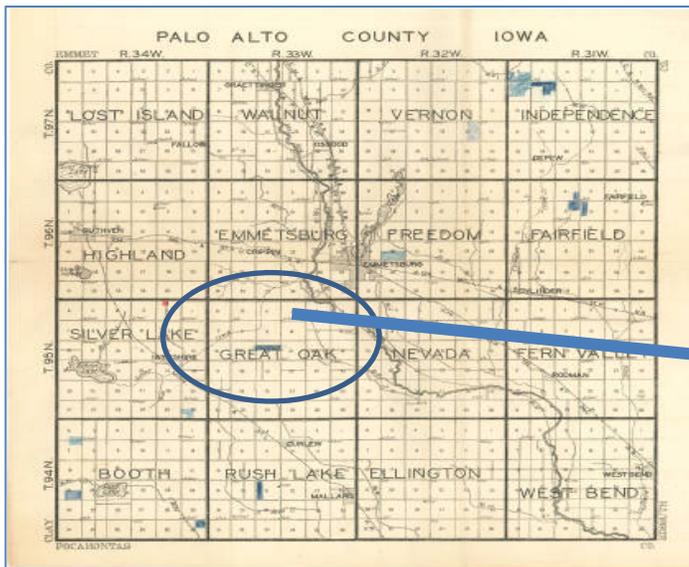
Excerpt from *History of Kossuth County Iowa*

History of Kossuth County Iowa (page 288)

By Benjamin F. Reed

The burial party left for Fort Dodge, April 4, at a time when all their provisions had been consumed. The suffering they endured in reaching home hardly finds a parallel in any historic story pertaining to the hardships experienced by the early settlers. They left the lakes when the weather was

warm and the melting snows were filling the sloughs to overflowing. Through these the men had to wade and splash until there was hardly a dry thread in their clothing. In the afternoon, the wind suddenly changing to the northwest, a cold, raging blizzard came upon them, freezing their clothing stiff and making their march extremely difficult. Night coming on, they became bewildered. Hands and feet were frozen and there was no chance to build a fire or get a mouthful to eat. They tramped around in the flying snow storm to keep warm, for to sit down or to remain quiet would insure certain death from freezing. Captain Johnson and W. E. Burkholder became separated from the others and were never seen alive again. Eleven years afterwards, their bleaching bones, their guns and their powder flasks were found by William Shea on section 3-95-33 in Palo Alto County. The entire command, except Johnson and Burkholder, managed to reach home alive, but several were badly frozen.



These maps indicate where the bodies of Captain Johnson and William Burkholder were discovered 11 years later.

Excerpt from *History of Palo Alto County Iowa*

History of Palo Alto County Iowa

By Dwight G. McCarty

The following story refers to the volunteers of the Spirit Lake burial party. Robert McCormick was a Private with Company B and one of 25 sent to bury the dead at Spirit Lake.

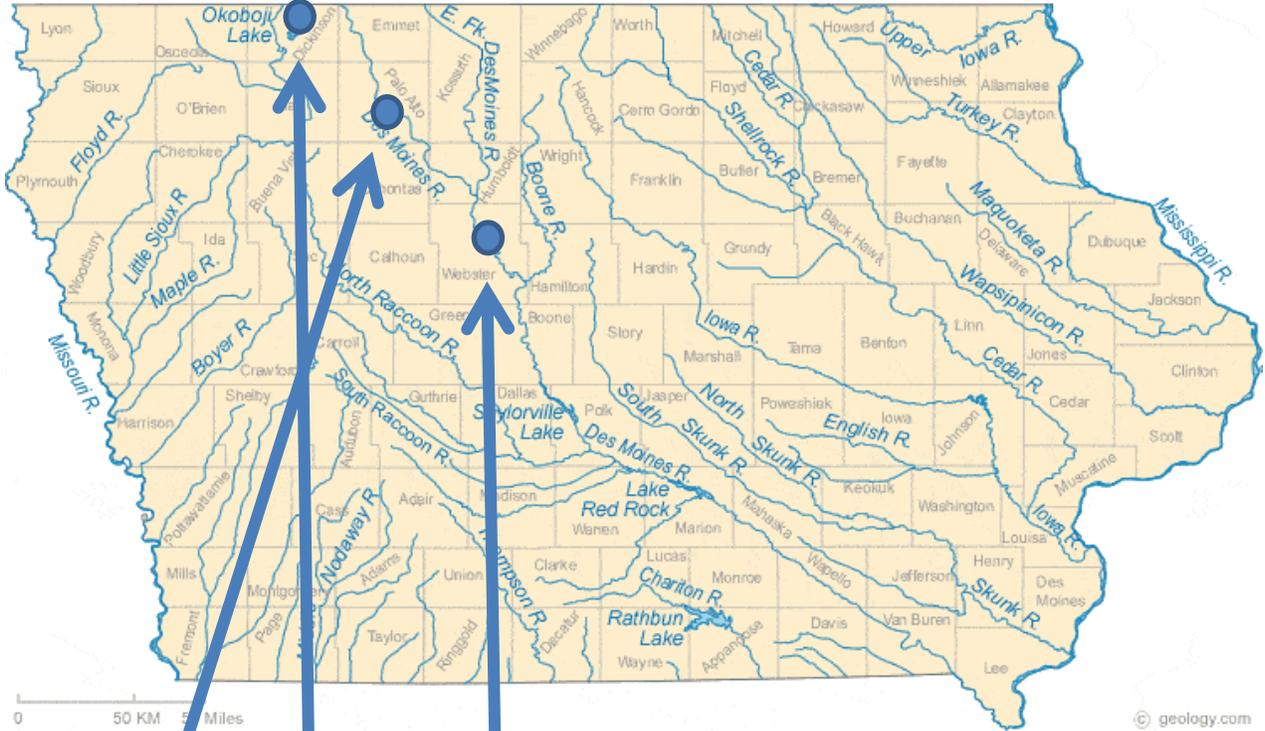
Robert McCormick was one of the volunteers who performed that sad mission. On the return this party suffered great hardships and two of the number, Captain Johnson and Private Burkholder, became separated from their comrades and perished in the cold. Their bones were found years later in Palo Alto County by William Shea on the northeast quarter of section 3-95-33.

The main body of the expedition returned to the Irish colony. “ Here the officers were called together to consult as to ways and means to get food to keep the men together until we could reach Fort Dodge. The settlers at the colony were on short rations and could spare nothing. We decided to buy a steer and kill for the party, but we had no money and the owner refused to sell without pay. We offered to give the personal obligation of all the officers, and assured him the state would pay a good price; but this was not satisfactory. We therefore decided to take one *vi et armis*, and detailed several men to kill and dress the steer. They were met by men, women and children, armed with pitchforks to resist the sacrifice, and not being able to convince them either of the necessity of the case or that they would get pay for the steer, I ordered Lieutenant Stratton and a squad of men with loaded guns to go and take the steer, when, seeing we were determined, and that further resistance would be useless, the hostile party retired. The animal was soon dressed and dis-

¹Paper by Michael Sweeny, *Annals of Iowa*, October, 1898, p. 540.

(Continued on Page 5)

The "Irish Colony" was located on the banks of the Des Moines River near what is now Emmetsburg.



Irish Colony

Spirit Lake

Fort Dodge

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tributed to the men, and for the first time in ten days they had a full meal.

“ We had hoped the detachment sent to the lakes might overtake us, but as they did not come we left what meat had not been used for the men, and resumed our march. The day was warm until about noon, when a cold rain began, making it dreary and dismal. We found several small creeks and all the ravines full of water, but crossed all without much detention until we arrived at Cylinder Creek, about twelve or fifteen miles from the colony, and two from Shippey's, where we expected to camp for the night. This point we reached about 3 p. m., when we found the bottom on the west side one vast sheet of water fully half a mile wide. We had become accustomed to overcoming obstructions and at once sent two men with poles to wade out as far as possible and ascertain the depth of the water. Their report was that the men could wade for nearly half a mile in water from two to five feet deep, when they would reach the channel proper of the creek, which was from sixty to eighty feet wide and very deep, with a swift current. We determined to make a boat from our wagon box by calking the cracks with cotton taken from our comforters and with this (first stretching a rope across the deep water) we could wade the men out to that point and run them across in the wagon box. . . . When we struck the swift current we were carried rapidly down stream, but by using our poles we managed to get across. As we struck the further shore where the bank was steep and a lot of ice piled up, our boat shut up like a jack knife, there being no braces at the corners. Every man jumped for shore and by getting hold of some willows all got out, Mason losing his overcoat and hat, and all getting wet. When the boat, which went under in the collapse, came up it was only separate boards floating down the rapid stream, and the rope was gone. The men who had come

out to hold one end could not stand the cold water longer and had waded back to the main body. We had hoped to stretch this rope across the deep water and ferry over the men.

“About this time the wind suddenly changed to the northwest and was blowing fiercely and very cold, so that our wet clothes began to freeze and stiffen. . . . In the face of that blizzard, for such it had now become, we could do nothing. By this time it had grown so dark that nothing could be seen of the other shore, neither on account of the noise of the wind could we get any reply to our frequent calls. We were utterly incapable of further exertion. The howling wind and drifting snow was fast obliterating the track. We consulted together and determined that it was as utterly impossible for us to render any assistance to our men as it would have been had they been in mid-ocean, and that our only safety lay in getting to Shippey's before the darkness and drifting snow made it impossible. It was a terrible walk with our frozen clothes and it was nine o'clock in the evening when we reached the cabin. Here we passed a night which no lapse of time will ever obliterate from my memory, so small was the cabin and so cold, and we had only our wet clothes. We warmed ourselves by the open fire, had some bacon and bread and a cup of coffee—the best thing to revive exhausted nature I have ever found. We had no blankets, but borrowed what the Shippeys could spare from their scanty store and spent the night, some trying to sleep, some drying their clothes by turning first one side to the fire, then the other, all anxious and making frequent visits to the door hoping the storm would abate, but each time only to find the wind and cold increasing. . . . I remember that it seemed as if the light of day would never come. The image of each man in the command, out in this terrible night, with neither

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food, fire or even the protection of a tent, was constantly before me."¹

The main part of the force was thus left on the open prairie to face the terrible blizzard. Lieutenant Mason thus describes their experiences: "We were now drenched to the skin and as the wind had shifted to the northwest it rapidly grew cold, and before many minutes our clothes were frozen stiff. We were very scantily dressed—few of the men having more than an undershirt and a pair of pants. I fared as well as any of them, and all I had to brave that fearful storm with, was a flannel shirt, a pair of pants with one leg torn off at the knee and the seam in the other ripped from top to bottom, and one boot with the leg cut off, the mate having been burned a few days previous. We began to look around for a place to sleep. Some of the boys spread their blankets on the ground and arranged themselves 'spoon fashion.' Brizee, Howland, Hathway, and myself lay behind the hind wheels of a wagon. We got through that night, but I hardly know how, as the mercury was over 30° below. We were all glad to see daylight, but many did not dare to crawl out of their blankets that day. The poor boys were almost freezing and some of them were becoming delirious. I think we were all more or less insane during a part of that terrible night. Brizee would frequently put his face to mine and beg me to 'go down the creek, only half a mile, where there was a big hotel, where we could get a warm breakfast with hot coffee.' When I would tell him that it was only a dream he would sob like a child and still insist that we must go. After daylight I fell into a doze, and dreamed that I was at my dear old mother's home, that I had been away and had come home hungry, and that she and a favor-

¹ Reminiscences of Chas. B. Richards, *Annals of Iowa*, Sept., 1898, pp. 517-520.

ite sister prepared some toast for me. I can see them now as I saw them then.

“The next morning was still and bright. Mr. Howland and myself concluded to cross the creek. We staggered to our frozen feet and arm in arm hobbled toward the stream. All eyes were upon us as we went out upon the ice. We began to feel encouraged but when we neared the center of the creek we found a space of open water, about thirty feet wide and very deep. We had resolved, however, never to return to that camp again, and looking up the stream we saw a clump of willows and went up to them. Here we found that ice had floated down, lodged against the willows and frozen there, thus forming a complete bridge. After passing the channel we signaled back, when a truly joyous shout went up from those poor half-insane boys. I will here state that there was not a man among our number — about 80 — who had strength enough to reach the opposite shore. I do not understand why they were so affected, the trouble seemed to be weakness and a shortness of breath. Every man's mouth was open wide, his tongue hanging out, and in some instances blood running from nose or mouth. Shippey's cabin, where Major Williams, Captains Duncombe and Richards, and Private Smith had been during the storm, was two and a half miles southeast of the creek. Howland and I kept together until we reached the cabin, and were among the last to arrive. He, being the stronger, had rendered me considerable assistance, for which I now, after thirty years, thank him most sincerely. Major Williams met us with great tears streaming down his furrowed cheeks, and those who had remained at the cabin rendered as all the assistance in their power. We soon devoured the provisions given us and all sank down in the warmth of the sun and slept. We were allowed to sleep till about three o'clock P. M., when we were aroused from our slumbers and a consultation

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was held. It was decided to disband, separate into small squads, and strike out for the nearest settlement."¹

"All of the command finally arrived safely except Captain Johnson and Wm. Burkholder, who perished in the awful storm not far from the Irish colony, on the west side of the west fork of the Des Moines River. Some of the party, however, received injuries from the exposure on the march from which they never recovered. I have doubts whether any body of men for the same length of time, on any march, ever suffered greater hardships, more constant exposure, more severe bodily labor, than those who composed the Spirit Lake expedition. . . . So long as the people of Iowa admire pluck and true courage; so long as Americans are freemen, the story of the Spirit Lake expedition will be told with pride by every true man of our state and by all who are familiar with her history."²

¹ Recollections of Frank R. Mason, *Annals of Iowa*, October, 1898, p. 535.

² Address of Capt. John F. Duncombe, *Annals of Iowa*, Sept., 1898, pp. 507-8.

From the *Journal of the House of Representatives*

From the *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 1858:



Governor James Grimes

During the past three years, my attention has been frequently called to the probability of a collision between the Indians and the settlers in the west and north-western counties of the State. I have repeatedly addressed the President of the United States, the Secretary of War, and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs; warning them of the apprehended danger, and urging that immediate steps be taken to remove the Indians beyond our limits.

Copies of my letters to the members in Congress from the State of Iowa, under date of 30th January, 1855, and to the President of the United States, under date of 3d December, 1855, I hereby transmit:

Without any military organization in the State, and without any power to act, except in the event of an actual hostile invasion; residing remote from the scene of anticipated difficulty, and fearful that some exigency might arise that would require prompt and energetic action; In January, 1855, I requested Maj. Wm. Williams, of Fort Dodge, to assume a general charge of this subject, and authorized him as far as I had power to do so, to act in my behalf, in any contingency that might arise in connection with the Indians.

In February last, Ink-pa-du-tah's band of Sioux Indians made a hostile incursion into the State, and perpetrated most horrible atrocities in Dickinson County. When intelligence of this event reached Fort Dodge, Maj. Williams at once enrolled three companies of men under Capt.'s Richards and Duncomb, of Webster County, and Captain Johnson, of Hamilton County, and proceeded to the scene of difficulty. These heroic men left

their homes in the most inclement season of the year, and endured almost unheard of sufferings and privations; crossing swollen streams flooded with ice, and traversing uninhabited prairies in the most tempestuous weather, that they might save their fellow-creatures from a savage butchery, or rescue them from captivity worse than death.

Two of their number, Capt. J. C. Johnson of Hamilton County, and William Burkholder, of Webster County, perished on the march. Others returned frozen and maimed. The expedition did not overtake the Indians; but they reached the scene of their barbarities, gave to the dead a Christian burial, and brought back with them, two children, the sole survivors of the slaughtered settlement.

The men who thus gallantly and humanely periled their lives, have received no compensation for the time employed in the expedition, or for their outfit. The Federal Government is in equity bound for their compensation. The Indian tribes are under its protection and control. It has allotted to each tribe a scope of country for its exclusive occupation. It has sold lands to settlers in this State, with the understanding that these tribes shall be confined to their respective limits, and that the possession of the land purchased shall never be disturbed by the Government, or those under its management. If the savages break over their bounds and inflict injury upon others, the Government should respond to the parties injured, for the damages sustained, and for the expenses incurred in protecting themselves against a repetition of the injury. To this end, I recommend that a memorial be addressed to the Congress of the United States.

But many of the members of Maj. Williams' command are unable to await the tardy action of Congress, and I therefore advise that the State assume the payment, and reserve the same from any appropriation that may be made.

Accompanying this, will be found the report of Commissary General C. B. Richards, showing the amount expended on account of this expedition . . .

I submit to the General Assembly, whether some public recognition of the noble gallantry and untimely death of Messrs. Johnson and Burkholder, is not alike due to their memory, and to the gratitude of the State.

I do not anticipate any further trouble from the Indians. The rumors put afloat in regard to future difficulty can generally be traced to interested persons who seek by their circulation to accomplish some ulterior purpose. To be prepared for any such emergency, however, I have established a depot for arms and ammunition at Fort Dodge, and have procured a cannon, muskets and ammunition for another depot in Dickinson County.

[1858 House of Representatives Journal](#)

[History of Palo Alto County Iowa](#)

[History of Kossuth County Iowa](#)

[Roster of the three Companies sent to Spirit Lake](#)

[History of Iowa from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century](#)